The Magnificent Defeat
I Corinthians 1:18-31
March 15, 1970
John M. Buchanan

Every so often the title of a book lodges itself in my mind far more firmly than its content. Such is the case with a volume of sermons by Frederick Buechner, under the title The Magnificent Defeat. I read the book several years ago, put it on the shelf and have referred to it only ocassionally since. But every time I see a cross I am reminded of the title. The Magnificent Defeat. Somehow, for me at least, that phrase summarizes everything I have read and learned and everything I feel about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Now, in absolute candor, we have to admit that while that phrase may be very clever, there really is no such thing. A defeat is a defeat. There is nothing magnificent, nothing glamorous about losing. Men may be magnificent in defeat as was Robert E. Lee. The very best training in competitive athletics happens when boys and young men learn to be magnanamousin the process of losing. But there is nothing magnificent per se in being defeated. Mr. DeMoss or Mr. King know that well. So do generals and businessmen and even preachers.

People like a winner. People, subconscicusly in our culture, simply assume that the winner is good. The theology of 19th century capitalism came right out and saidthat the good man will be blessed by providence with success and wealth. Winners wear white hats. Losers black. It's a very subltle thing with us, but we are quite enamored with the successful man - the winner - who also does good things. That makes us feel good because it supports our theology that winning is always good and losing always bad. And if you aren't with me at this point may I suggest that you witness parental reaction to a little league baseball game. There, at the ripe old age of 9 or 10, we teach the fundamental lesson that the name of the game is winning, that it is a shame to be a loser.

Well, we Christians have a real problem at this point because Jesus Christ our Lord was one of the world's most notorious losers. By any standards at all he was a failure. After thirty-three years - in the prime of his strength and

vigor, when other men are receiving that first important promotion, getting that first big raise, Jesus of Nazareth lost the game. Scorned, regarded as a fraud, traitor, abandoned by all his friends, arrested by the authorities and executed as a common crimminal. You can't be any more of a loser than that.

We disguise that fact very adroitly. To be sure we keep a lot of crosses around - burnished brass and polished walnut, that is. Beautiful crosses, works of art, silver crosses with rhinestones, plastic crosses that glow in the dark. And the total effect is to hide the fact that the cross was ugly. That men screamed when they were stretched out on the cross beams and nailed through the hands and feet. That disguises the fact that the cross was intentionally reserved for those special crimminals for whom a quick death was too merciful: men who needed to be spat upon and derided as their lives ebbed slowly. We need an ugly cross every now and then to jolt us back to reality. Our Lord was a loser. The symbol of our faith stood, in his day, in the same place that an electric chair stands today: total failure: total shame: total defeat. John Baillie put it well: "But a religion that deliberately chooses a gallows-tree for its coat of arms, what do men want of that?" [A Well Reasoned Faith p. 154]

"Nothing" we well might answer. We prefer a winner. That's always been the issue. St. Paul went to Athens once, the citadel of learning and philosophy. There, on Mars Hill, the scholars - the learned men, gathered daily. One would speak, presenting a logical argument about some philosophic question like "What is good." The others would listen and criticize and debate. It was the Athenian's favorite past-time. St. Paul went there and because he too was a learned, articulate man, was received graciously. He began to speak and they listened, until he talked about the cross. And then they laughed him right out of town. Winners were at least logical. Meanwhile back in the Jewish cities to the East men were laughing, because this cross business just didn't square with the going Messianic hope.

And so when he sat down to write a letter to his Christian friends in the

city of Corinth - Greeks and Jews - he came right out and said it. "Christ crucified is a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Greeks." The cross is foolish nonsense to almost everybody in the world. It was a defeat: Jesus Christ was a loser. But to those God has given the grace to feel its impact, its significance, its meaning, it was magnificent!

Let's go deeper, and while we are going deeper let's go easy on the Jews. Let's stop blaming them for the cross. They were very human - very real in their response to what was happening in their midst. There they were, prisoners in their own country. For century after miserable century they had been the door mat of the Middle East. Assynia, Persia, Babylon, Egypt and now Rome. Like clock work the political powers of the area defeated and subjugated and exploited their tiny nation, carried off their people and desecrated their holiest traditions. They knew what it meant to be losers: they had been losing for a thousand years. They looked back, therefore, to the only days that made much sense to them - the days of David and Solomon, the days of power and wealth, the days when Israelite armies trampeled everything in their path, the days when they were winners. And because men always see the future in terms of past experience, that was what they expected. They were waiting for the day of the Lord. They hoped for and prayed for and expected a divine intervention on their behalf. They longed for Emmanuel, the promised Messiah, because he would be a winner. He would say the right word, solidify the nation, ignite the fervor of patriotism and dump the legions of Caesar unceremoniously into the sea. Can we really blame them for that? Can we really blame them for their inability to comprehend that God might come among them as a loser? They were so very human, actually. They got rid of him: they trumped up the charges and spewed out all that collected frustration and hostility. They executed the one who so terribly offended the only hope they had left. After they had done it they still could make no sense of it. The cross and the Messiah just didn't go together.

It was a stumbling block for them and patent nonsense for the intellectual Greeks to the West. Let's go easy on them as well. They invented logic. They

taught the world how to think and build and sculpture. They, of all people in the world were open to a new idea - a new truth. And so they listened anxiously to this message brought into their midst by men calling themselves Christians. "God is one. Ultimate truth, ultimate reality, ultimate good is a unity." O.K.: that's new: that makes sense: that sounds like something Plato said years ago. "God who created man did so in his own image." O.K. "The one God who created also loves all men equally and cares for them all as his children." O.K.: in fact this system sounds quite good, really: very creative. But hold on - this one God - this ultimate reality came among men as a carpenter? And was crucified? This God died on a cross? Absurd, you've got to be kidding. We thought you had hold of something, but that cross business is a bunch of foolishness.

That's the kind of world Paul lived in: a world quite open to a new theology, a world ready and willing to receive its Christ; but a world that would not and could not see any magnificence at all in the cross. And so Paul, in his preaching and teaching and writing persisted: "this is where it is: this is what the Gospel means: we preach Christ and him crucified. Take away the cross and there is no Good News, no Gospel, no Christ." Paul combined the event of crucifixion and its meaning - and called it the cross, and planted it firmly at the center of history, at the center of the church, at the center of theology - and at the center of the Christian life.

Well, there is a lot of those Jewish and Greek mentalities in us. We like a winner and we want our religion in that category too. It offends us that at the center of our faith is a symbol of defeat and suffering and death even though we may not say it that way. We have other ways, of course, like applying the "winner principle" to our church. Success is good: lots of people, lots of dollars is the name of the game. Or like our shyness in the face of sacrifice and self giving. Church isn't supposed to mean that. Church is supposed to make us feel good and undergird whatever we are doing, and leave us to our prejudices and opinions. We really aren't much different from those who stumbled over the

fact that he was crucified.

We like our logic too. We want our answers. We go our merry way in life assuming that God has made the world and other people for our own pleasure. And then disaster strikes, tragedy hits close to home, nothing makes sense, and we shout in the face of God, "Why this? Why me? Why have you done this to me." We do that because we've never really stood at the foot of that ugly cross and looked up at the Son of God, hanging there, himself dying and defeated.

What does it mean? What does this symbol of defeat mean to us and for us? It is significant that the Church in its wisdom has never really had an official position. For 2,000 years men have been trying to explain what the cross means in various doctrines of atonement. You are familiar with them even though you may not use the correct theological jargon. There is the ransom theory which holds that men had to be brought back from sin by a costly gift. The life of Jesus was that gift. There is the substitutionary theory which maintains that the holiness of God could not stand the evil of men. Eternal justice demands punishment. Jesus - the paschal lamb - is punished in our place. He got what we deserve. There is the cosmic theory which maintains that cosmic good and cosmic evil met in collision on calvary - with evil winning a temporary victory. There is the identification theory which holds that the meaning of the cross is in the complete identification of the Holy God with the poor plight of men. God has been where we are - even in death.

You know a funny thing happened to me as I researched all that last week. There was a time, not very long ago that I would have focused on one of those theories, and assumed that the preaching task was to cement into every Presbyterian head a good, sound atonement doctrine. But it occurred to me last week that I have, at one time or another in my life, believed everyone of the theories. In each of them there are meanings that are significant for me still. And then it occurred to me that to focus on doctrine here, to present a tight theological statement with all the corners in place, to assume that we have confronted the

crucifixion when we have an intellectual rational that satisfies us now, is to do exactly what St. Paul warned the Corinthians about.

Paul said some disturbing things at this point: e.g. "So then, where does that leave the wise men? Or the scholars? Or the skillful debaters of this world? God has shown that this world's wisdom is foolishness! For God in his wisdom made it impossible for men to know him by means of their own wisdom." Think about that for a little while and be devastated! Pick up the shattered pieces of your fancy theologies, the fragments of your nice cozy religion and walk up that long hard road to the foot of the cross. That's what St. Paul had in mind. For him it was as hopeless to attempt to get in touch with the reality of God through philosophy as it is to approach the reality of a rose through pure botany. The cross - must be stood under. The Magnificence of the Defeat must be experienced.

Wallace Hamilton tells a story that says it all: [The Anatomy of Courage, The Protestant Hour 1968 p. 6 & 7] "An Archbishop of Paris stood in the pulpit of Notre Dame Cathedral. Thirty years ago, he said, three young men came into this Cathedral, rough, rude and cynical. Two of them bet another he couldn't go into a Confessional and make a phony confession. He tried to fool the old priest, but the priest sensed the arrogance, the lie and said: ' very well, my son. Every confession requires a pennance, and this will be yours. Go into the chapel, stand before the Crucifix, look into the face of the crucified Christ, and say - all this you did for me, and I don't care a damn'".

The young man swaggered out of the Confessional, but his companions would not pay the bet until he had done the required penance. So he went to the chapel and looked at the Crucified Christ and said "All this you did for me, and I ...." He never finished the sentence. And the Archbishop telling the story leaned over the pulpit and said - "I was that young man."

What happened to Jesus Christ was for us. However you wish to adorn it, that defeat was an act of God - for our sakes. And because of that, because the

death of Jesus Christ is far more something God has done for us, than something men did to Jesus, it is a Magnificent Defeat.

Wise men knelt in adoration at his manger. They didn't theologize. They didn't discuss. They didn't make doctrinal statements. So - the wise man will kneel before his cross.

Amen.

Almighty God, as we near the observance of our Lord's death, open our hearts to its magnificence. Still our minds that we might kneel beneath his cross in silence and reverence and love.

Amen.